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Edna Murphy

LIFE FROM ANOTHER PERSPECTIVE:
A BLACK WOMAN'S AUTOBIOGRAPHY


An Interview Conducted by
Sally Bush
in 1985
for the
Menlo Park Historical Association

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I made this index years ago - change if you like - A subtitle might be.

"a black woman's autobiography"

LIFE FROM ANOTHER PERSPECTIVE

An Interview With Edna Murphy

1986

DATE: October 1, 1985

INTERVIEW WITH EDNA MURPHY

Sally: Today is October first, 1985 and we are to interview Edna Murphy. First of all, where were you born?

Edna : Kansas City, Missouri.

Sally: Where did you go to school?

Edna : I started at Attucks Elementary School in Kansas City and then I went to St. Monica's Catholic School in Kansas City. I also lived there. You see, when I was nine my parents were divorced. My father was a Methodist minister and my mother hadn't worked since we were born. Incidentally, you know a lot of people take it for granted that black people -- especially black women -- have a lot of children very young. Well, I think my mother and dad had been married about nine years, eight or nine years, before I was born, and I have one sister older, so they must have been married about six years before she had children. She worked till that time, from what I understand. But then after we came she stayed home. There were seven of us.

Sally: But when she did have children she had quite a few.

Edna : I know. And mine were born after I was married almost nine years.

Sally: And you had seven?

Edna : And I had seven.

Sally: All living?

Edna : Yes. And all doing pretty good, considering the times. Let's see. the oldest one, Jody is living with us now. She worked at Fairchild for 12 years and lived in Mountain View. She was laid off. I think it was in May.

Sally: Many people were.

Edna : So she came home to live with us. She's never married, never had any children. She lived alone. The oldest son, Warren Jr., has been working at Peterbilt Motors in Fremont for about seven years now, and he's now a supervisor over there. And then we have Steve, who is a Chief Petty Officer in the Navy, and Kenneth, who is an Air Traffic Controller in the Air Force -- that's a tough job -- and they've both been in quite a while. Steve's been in almost 16 years, and Kenneth's been in for about 14. And then there is Stacey, who is with the Writer's Guild in Los Angeles, and Lance, who is one of Hewlett-Packard's support engineers. They send him all over the world, you know, different places, to repair and give

lessons and training in the use of HP products. Alison is married to a soldier from North Carolina. They've been married for almost eight years, and have three children, a little girl who will be six in November, a little boy who will be four in November, and another boy who will be one in November - all born in November, how about that! They live at Fort Ord. They were in Germany about four years.

Sally: Now is she the youngest?

Edna : She's the youngest.

Sally: So they're all doing happy, productive jobs?

Edna : Oh, yes.

Sally: You said earlier that you felt that the unrest at the school contributed to this? Warren Jr.'s rebellion? What do you mean - unrest? Are you talking about the 60's when there was unrest between the black and the white?

Edna : Right.

Sally: And you felt that that made him upset enough?

Edna : Well, you see, my first child, Jody, entered high school in '64, and in those years, you see, a black kid whose parents weren't professionals or right on the ball about things, ignored it. And Jody was quiet, too. She was the type who could get lost in a classroom. She'd sit back there. We would check her report cards when she brought them home and we'd always be, well, just giving her a hard time about her grades, especially math. Her Dad tried to coax her, you know, tutor her in math but he just couldn't seem to get through to her. But I guess we were going at it too hard; at the time we didn't know about children, learning disabilities, things like that. Not that Jody had a learning disability, she had a block, a mental block when it came to math.

Sally: Join the crowd!

Edna : Yes, me too. I mean I never did like math and I just turned it off. And I'm sure that's what she did. Although I knew at that time that I had to learn. But anyway, when Bobbie went in--now Jody was the kind that would never get involved in any type of trouble at school. She would just turn her back on it. But Bobbie, on the other hand, was very impressionable.

Sally: Bobbie meaning Warren Jr.?

Edna : Yes. We always called him Bobbie instead of Junior. We never did like Junior. Whereas, he, on the other hand, was very

impressionable and he liked to be with the "in" crowd. So whenever the kids did anything going against authority, that's what he would want - he would tell us, "You're dumb, you don't know anything" - you know.

Sally: It's true of black and white. It's the same thing.

Edna : Yes. It's the same thing, you know. So we tried to explain to him that his friends weren't necessarily doing him any good. I remember one incident clearly - it was in the 1960's. I went to the high school one day - that's when the parents had to get involved to see what was going on. There were very few black kids on campus. I talked with the Community Worker and she said, "Well, I think they're having a meeting down at the Teen Center," which was at the end of Willow Road, at Hamilton and Willow Road, in Menlo Park. I said, "Well, I'm going down there and see what's going on." So I went, and outside it looked like the place was deserted - I couldn't hear or see anything. I parked and walked up to the door, opened it and looked in. It was dark in there. All these kids, all from Menlo-Atherton sitting there in the dark, and there was a spotlight on the stage. And these two - I think there were three young adults, or in their early twenties were on the stage, telling these kids that they should go back to Menlo-Atherton and turn the school out. Just wreck it, tear it up, because those people don't like you, they don't mean you any good, and you don't need anything that they have. Well here I am looking at these two --

Sally: Did you know them?

Edna : As it turned out, the guy that was talking when I walked in was an ex-convict who had never graduated from high school and trying to use the kids - these impressionable kids - for his own advantages. And they were sitting up there listening.

Sally: You mean you walked in -- ?

Edna : I walked into the crowd. I sure did.

Sally: Scared?

Edna : No. I was not afraid then. I was mad. You see, I'm always going to get angry before I get scared. I get scared later. But I get angry first. So I went in there and I said, "Now you're sitting there listening to this loser talk." I said, "He didn't graduate from high school. He has nothing to work for him, and he wants you guys to be just like he is." I said, "Tell me how in the world do you think you're going to go up against a group of people with guns and things, with sticks and stones? And where do you think your sticks and stones are going to get you later on? Those are the people who are going to hire you to work.

What has he got to offer you?" They sat there and they didn't say a thing. And I continued with my speech and I just walked on out the door. And I told them before I left, "Now if you go up there to Menlo-Atherton and cause all the trouble he says he thinks you should, you are bigger fools than he is."

Sally: Good for you.

Edna : And I just walked out the door. I think after I left they all just dispersed and went on. There was no trouble at Menlo-Atherton that day.

Sally: And there were three people?

Edna : Three people.

Sally: Were they all convicts?

Edna : I don't know - I didn't know the other two. I just noticed a woman and another man standing at the edge of the spotlight, but I knew that they were adults and they had all been saying pretty much the same thing to these kids.

Sally: Do you feel that these three had something to do with inciting the riots we had there?

Edna : There were some others that did, adults. Oh yes, they were adults. No, the kids didn't think of this themselves. You are always going to find one or two students who are going to be the ring-leaders in any sort of trouble.

Sally: Sure.

Edna : Okay? But unless the others have these adults to back them up, you're not going to have any trouble. But these adults like - here was, what's his name? Do you know him?

Sally: Yes - he was a basketball player.

Edna : No, no. His son was a basketball player. At that time, the father was one of the rabble rousers. He was a little short guy with this kind of an Eastern cap on his head, pillbox sort of thing, and he would be up there preaching black power to the kids. Well I always felt that any kind of power was fine but you've got to have some finances to back it up with. So he and I never did agree. We never got along together.

Sally: Your father was a minister?

Edna : My father was a Methodist minister, who studied at Seminary, and he was an ordained minister. My father was one of the few black

men you would meet, in those days when I was a kid, who graduated from high school. He was very bright, and very ambitious. Ambitious to the point where he felt that we were holding him back - his family.

Sally: That's why the divorce?

Edna : That's why the divorce.

Sally: Your mother was educated?

Edna : No. This is another thing. They were married nearly 16 years when they were divorced, and my mother only had a sixth grade education. Dad married her because he needed, well, I think he loved her to begin with, you know, but she was working and she helped him. But after they had kids, she didn't work anymore, she stayed hom all the time and took care of us. I remember the times we lived in nice houses, I remember the times when, especially in the summer-time during school vacation, that every afternoon after lunch we'd have a nap. After we woke up from our naps we had a bath. She changed our clothes and we had starched dresses on with bows in our hair and white socks and we would look nice for Daddy when he came home. I mean it was one of those kind of lives that you really don't see anymore. The last house I remember we lived in as a family, was a nice two-story house with a basement, and all the bedrooms were on the second floor, and we had a dining room, livig room and kitchen. It was a real nice house. And when Daddy and Mom started getting along real bad, we had this spare room in the back - a sort of closed-in sun porch, and he moved back there, and moved all his stuff back there.

Sally: did he support the family while he was there?

Edna : Yes, he supported the family while he was there. But when he moved out, then Mama had to go to court to get money for us. Finally when he got the divorce, he got custody of all of us except the baby.

Sally: She did?

Edna : No, he did. Because the judge ruled that he was the one who could support us. He was making the money and she had nothing to support us with. So he got custody of six of us. And she took the baby.

Sally: Was this in Kansas City?

Edna : This was in Kansas City. So she went back to her folks in Louisiana, where she had come from, and took the baby with her. Dad had put in for space for us at the convent, but there was no room right then. In the meantime he rented a flat and hired a housekeeper for us.

Sally: Do you remember where this was?

Edna : This was all in the black neighborhood. The house we lived in was on 16th and Norton. And the convent was on 17th and Lydia. Now it is like a shrine - I was there about five years ago and they have built up all around it but they have left this little convent, with the little chapel and all. It is right in the middle of all these big buildings.

Sally: Did all six of you go there?

Edna : All six of us.

Sally: You boarded there?

Edna : Yes. All six of us. See, there were four girls and two boys, and they had a part for boys, and one part for girls.

Sally: How long were you there?

Edna : I was there actually from nine to twelve, three years, and for four years I was under their supervision. Because their school only went through 7th grade, I had to go to public high school. So they found a family -- a white family - for me to live with. They lived out on - let's see, what was that street - 70th and - I forget the name of the street, anyway it was way out at the end of town, practically. So I lived with them. They had one little girl about three years old. I had complete care of her. Now I was only thirteen myself and so short I had to stand on a box to wash the dishes, to reach the sink.

Sally: Were they nice to you?

Edna : Not really. See they were from Oklahoma, and they lived with the thought that black people were no more than animals, you know, put here for their convenience, and I was just another one of their household appliances. They never talked to me.

Sally: Did they ever beat you?

Edna: No, no, no. They weren't like that. They didn't abuse me. But --

Sally: You didn't exist.....

Edna : I didn't exist. Except for what I could do for them. Take care of their little girl, wash her clothes, wash up the dishes, clean the house. Stuff like that. And I remember one time in particular they wanted to...you see, my room was up in the attic - they had partitioned off part of the attic, and it was miserable. It was cold in the winter and hot in the summer. But anyway,

they had partitioned off this space for me - they had a bed in there, a little dresser and things like that. Well, they decided that they wanted to turn the attic into a sort of playroom, and they wanted to put a ping pong table up there. So they moved me down to the basement - that's where they kept the dog. So they partitioned off a place in the basement and put a little straw rug down there, you know, a 9 x 12 rug, and that part on that rug was my place, my living space. They had a bed down there, and a little dresser. I shared the basement with the dog, and the washing machine and things like that. One day -- on Sundays I was allowed to go to St. Monica's to visit my sisters and brothers. So I would get the bus and go. Usually, when I came back, they wanted to go to church and in order for me to get to the house in time to babysit the little girl, he'd pick me up at the street car stop, which was about 5 or 6 blocks from the house. He'd pick me up so they wouldn't be late for services. This particular Sunday night - it was in the summertime - I had taken my younger sister to the show, which was about four blocks from the convent. When we came out - she had on a white dress - her period had started for the first time.

Sally: Oh boy! What timing!

Edna : Yes. And it was still daylight. It must have been about seven o'clock. Usually I would get the streetcar right there in front of the show to go back to work and let her go on to the convent alone. But this time I decided I could not let her walk through the streets like that, we walked all the way back, with me walking behind her so nobody could see. As soon as I got her there and the sisters found out what was happening she was taken care of. Then I ran to get the streetcar. When I got off at my stop Mr. Davidson was waiting for me in his car. I'll never forget it. He was just fuming. "Why are you late? You're going to make us late for church." He didn't ask me what happened, or anything. "You know you're supposed to be here at a certain time," he said. Well, I've always been like this - it's just my nature. If you yell at me, you're not going to get anything out of me. Besides, at that time you didn't tell a man something like that, anyway.

Sally: You bet you didn't. That was not something....

Edna : No. So I sat there and I never said one word. He chewed me out good all the way to the house. I got out and went in and took my hat and things off. She was sitting there glaring at me. She never asked anything so I just ignored both of them. That's one thing they couldn't understand about me. That I could just ignore them. I would catch them looking at me sometimes as if, hmm..... there's something different about her. But I was always very independent. I had a mind of my own and I wasn't about to let them know what I was thinking. If they wanted to think I was

stupid, fine, but they knew I wasn't stupid. They thought that I was smart and they wondered why. Finally my mother came back from Louisiana and got a job and decided she wanted all her children back. She found out from the sisters where I was and came out there one afternoon, and told them she was taking me home.

Sally: What kind of school were you going to while you were working for this woman?

Edna : The deal was that I would live with them, take care of the little girl, do the housework and wash the dishes, and go to school. I went to Lincoln High School, which at the time had moved from this old place near 18th and Vine out farther. His place of business - he worked for a paper manufacturing company - was about two blocks away from Lincoln High School. He had to be at work about the same time I had to be at school. So every morning I would ride with him, and he'd let me off where he worked and I'd walk a couple of blocks to the high school. In the evening, I rode home on the street car. So that's how I got back and forth to school. I only had enough money for streetcar fare. They were supposed to pay me \$3.50 a week, and the nuns got the \$3.00 and I got the \$.50. Which was why I spent \$.25 a week for streetcar fare because I only had to ride one way. And I could get six tickets for a quarter.

Sally: What did you do for clothes?

Edna : Well, the nuns were supposed to take care of my clothes. I wore hand-me-downs, of course people would give the school lots of things, you know, so I wore those. Daddy bought the shoes - he gave the money to pay for the shoes.

Sally: No extras?

Edna : Nothing extra. I had nothing extra. The \$.25 a week I would spend - well the nuns would give my sister a quarter and we would go to the show - I think it was \$.15. So actually I ended up with a dime. I remember the only Easter dress I ever had while I was there. Mrs. Davidson had given me one of her old dresses. I cut it in half and made a real nice little bolero and skirt. All by hand.

Sally: Was your mother part French?

Edna: Yes, she was French, American Indian and African.

Sally: Do you know what kind of American Indian? What tribe?

Edna : Let me see--I don't know whether it was Seminole or Cherokee.

Sally: Oh, Seminole might be Florida -

Edna : Well, it could have been. You see, she was born in a little place called New Liberia, Louisiana. My grandmother was French, Indian and African. So it came from a long way back. I didn't know my grandmother's parents or anything about them, I only knew as far back as my grandmother.

Sally: What about your grandfather?

Edna : I never knew my grandfather, because he was dead by the time I was born. But I have a picture of him, and he looked just like an Indian. He had straight, black hair, very straight and black and he had the dark features of the African, but he had the Indian, so the Indian came from his side of the family, too. He looked more like it because he had the hair. That's all that I have of him. I have the picture at home, too.

Sally: Do you have any idea how long your family has been in this country, how far back they go?

Edna : No, I have no idea. I imagine it would be, let's see, oh, I would imagine about 10 or 12 generations, I'm not sure, but I think that would be about it.

Sally: Quite a ways. What about your husband's family, now that we're talking about genealogy.

Edna : He's part Indian.

Sally: Is he?

Edna : Yes, African and Irish. He's Indian, Irish and African. His hair is curly and soft, real soft curly, not kinky, like mine. He's got the hair and he's got Irish features, blunt, you know, and he has the Irish disposition - they like to drink, and they have terrible tempers.

Sally: And they're very funny, and witty people--

Edna: Yes. He is. He has Indian and Irish features, and then he has the color of the African. So he's Indian, African and Irish. So my kids are all mixed up. I tell people when you marry into the Murphy family, you've got something on your hands!

Sally: The best of everything!

Edna: The best of everything. When I went to Paris - you know I was in Paris for two days, I felt so much at home, I just loved it. I'd love to go back again someday

Sally: So your mother came and she took you where?

Edna : My mother rented an apartment on Paseo, and it was big enough for the eight of us. Seven kids and her. So I moved in and took a job with another family that paid more. They paid me \$6.25 a week for housework and that was pretty good at that time.

Sally: So you didn't live with them?

Edna : No, I didn't. They were a Jewish family who lived in an apartment, farther out on Paseo. I went home every night. I worked for them for about six months or so. I was still just a kid, and they had a teenage daughter and a teenage son. They had gone to one of their Jewish holiday services one day, and when they came back, I had been so busy playing with the kids, that I hadn't cleaned up the kitchen. So her mother, who didn't live with them, had come there to have dinner, was complaining because I hadn't cleaned. I said I'd do it right away, because I didn't want to tell her that I had been playing with the kids. Then her mother said to me, "Well, you ought to be glad you don't work for me, because if you did, I would show you something," and waved her finger in my face. I just stopped what I was doing and said, "You are not going to show me anything." I got my hat and walked out. The daughter said, "Don't go, don't go." I said, "Forget it." And I left. I never went back. I left her with all the mess and everything, I didn't care. In the first place, it wasn't her mother's business to say anything to me, and secondly, she had no right to talk to me like that. So that's all there was to that. Shortly after that I got another job, but this was a live-in job. I worked for those people for about five years. They were a nice Catholic family. She was Irish, he was Syrian. He was in the Insurance business. They had two little girls at the time I went there, and while I was there she had another little girl. One day the family had gone out and left the little girl with me and her grandfather. He was a jeweler - his name was Scherer. They were in the kitchen having lunch. The little girl was sitting in her highchair and he was teaching her "Eenie, Meenie, Miney, Mo, catch a nigger by the toe." I said, "Mr. Scherer, don't you dare teach that child that," and he looked at me as if he'd seen me for the first time. He said, "Oh, I'm sorry, Edna." I had been with them for about three years at that time, and they had taken me so much for granted that they forgot what color I was. And he says, "Oh, I'm sorry. You're right. I'm sorry." So I realized that he really didn't mean to hurt my feelings, he just hadn't noticed.

Sally: So in a kind of reverse way, it was a compliment.

Edna : It was a compliment, yes. But I had to let him know.

Sally: You bet, you bet.

Edna : I couldn't let that pass. The one other day he was there, he had gone down into the basement, which opened onto the kitchen. The baby, Cathy, was in her stroller, and had wheeled herself over to the door. I had my back turned and I didn't know he was down there, didn't know the door was open and I looked just in time to see her tumbling down the stairs. I dove after the baby and I bawled him out, "Why did you leave that door open?" He was so upset he was almost crying. Poor old thing!

Sally: Was she all right?

Edna : She was all right, but it had frightened me so.

Sally: Oh, yes. Of course.

Edna : She could have gotten killed, you know. It scared him so and I yelled at him, and he was just shaking. But I didn't tell the folks when they came back. So while I was with them, I married Warren.

Sally: How'd you meet him?

Edna : Well, I met him at a dance, actually, on a Sunday evening. I had gone there with my sister.

Sally: Do you remember what the music was or who was playing?

Edna : Yes, Jimmy Lunceford ---

Sally: So you met Warren and married him and then did you continue working?

Edna : Well, no. I quit working for them after I married him because I couldn't live on the place anymore, and Warren and I moved into an apartment on Paseo right off 12th Street.

Sally: Did your father marry you?

Edna : No, we were married in a parsonage in another Methodist church.

Sally: Not by---

Edna : No, not Catholic, Methodist. You see, Warren wasn't Catholic. The preacher who married us, knew my father. Dad didn't know I was married. He hadn't kept up with us. After the divorce, which was kind of a scandal because divorces weren't common then involving a minister, he was sent to a parish in Butte, Montana. When he came back, he was assigned to a church in Kansas. Warren and I had been married about six

months when he was in Kansas City visiting one of his parishioners who happened to be the manager of our apartment. She mentioned to him during the course of conversation, that one of his daughters lived there with her husband. So he came down and knocked on the door. Warren had gone to work and I was there alone. I opened the door and I was so surprised! "Come in, Dad," I said. He came in and sat down looking a little uneasy. I began to think about the way he had left us and not bothered to keep up with us or anything. He paid the child support to the convent, you know, but it wasn't quite enough. That's why I had to work and my older sister had to work, and the sister after me had to work, to help pay the board bill. I thought, well, you can't tell me anything anymore, you can't do anything to me anymore. I started to smoke, when I was 17. That's what everyone was doing. I was going to be sophisticated, too. And Dad never smoked anything but a pipe. It went against his grain to see a woman smoking. I wasn't quite sure about that, but I wanted to test it. So I pulled out a cigarette. I lit it, and looked at Daddy. He looked at me, and I guess he realized then that I was nineteen and a married woman, and there was nothing he could do or say to me. So he didn't say anything, just went right on talking, but I could see the look in his eye - that he was disappointed, but he had the good sense not to say anything. Anyway, before he left I invited him and his new wife to dinner the following Sunday.

Sally: He came?

Edna : He came, and the dinner was a disaster because I didn't know anything about cooking - I had never had to cook. Nobody had ever taught me. I wanted to have fried chicken for him, and I didn't know that chickens came in different types. I went to the poultry shop and told the man that I wanted a big chicken. He didn't ask me how I was going to cook it or anything. He gave me a big chicken. So I took it home and it happened to be one of those tough, old stewing hens. Fricasse chicken, and I fried it! Well, you couldn't bite into it, you couldn't do anything with it! So that part was a disaster.

Sally: What was Warren doing for a job?

Edna : He was working at the Kansas City Transfer Company - a trucking company, and he made pretty good money.

Sally: What made you come to California?

Edna : He had been drafted - in February of '42 - and shortly before he was drafted, the Melham's -- the people I worked for, for so long, had moved. He had been transferred to Springfield,

Illinois. So they found out that he had gone into the Service and they asked me to come up there and live with them. So I went. I would have been with them longer but what happened was this. While I was working for them in Kansas City, I was a single teenage girl, and Mr. Melham was a very nice man, but when I moved to Illinois, he had decided that I was no longer an innocent young girl, but a married woman and since my husband wasn't around, obviously I needed a man. And he tried - on two occasions I remember - he came into my bedroom one Sunday morning to tell me they were going to church. Well, it was hot, it was really hot, and I hadn't realized it, but I was sleeping nude with just a wheet over me and it never occurred to me that you could see my black body through the sheet. He opened the door and said, "I just wanted to tell you that we're getting ready to go to church," and he was looking at me, you know, and I said, "Okay." He stood there a minute before he went out. The next time, I was bending over in the kitchen, picking up something in the corner and he came by and slapped me on the behind. I says, "Why, you---" I started to call him a dirty name, and he knew it, so he hurried out. The next time it happened, I was in the bathroom, taking a bath, and I was just getting out of the tub, when he came up - the bedrooms were on the second floor, and we all shared the same bathroom. She had gone shopping - it was on a Saturday afternoon, and he hollered from the bottom of the stairs, "Edna, would you throw me down a towel?" I said "Okay." That would give me a chance to wrap a towel around myself and reach out the door and throw the towel down. But when he hollered from the bottom of the stairs, he tippy-toed up the stairs so he could be standing right there at the door when I opened it. I pushed the towel right in his face, and slammed the door. Shortly after that my mother had received a letter from her brother, who had been living in San Francisco for years, telling her how good the jobs were out here and if she had one kid old enough to send out here, it would be company for him and he or she would have a nice job too. So she thought of me right away and she asked me about it. I had been putting off, trying to make up my mind whether I wanted to come to San Francisco or not. Well that did it!! I told Mrs. Melham, "I'm going to leave you." She was very upset because she and I had been more or less like sisters. She wore my clothes - I didn't wear hers because they weren't as good as mine. She liked my taste, and we wore about the same size so she would borrow my clothes. She would come in the kitchen when I was washing dishes and take my garters off of me because she couldn't find hers, and I was standing there with my stockings hanging down. We were on thos kind of terms, you know. So she was furious! I'll never forget the scene - we were standing at the top of the stairs and she asked "Well, why? Where are you going?" I said, "I'm going to San Francisco to live with an uncle." And she says, "Hmmm, I smell a nigger in the woodpile." I looked at her and I thought to myself, well, there's a nigger, and he's your husband.

Sally: But you didn't say it.

Edna : I never told her. Because I felt that if I had said anything, well, she had to live with this man --

Sally: That shows real restraint --

Edna : I didn't have to live with him, you know, and she could be mad at me for no matter what, but she had to live with him the rest of her life. So I thought, well, I'll take that and I'll leave. I took it, and I left. But I often thought of that incident.

Sally: I'll bet you did.

Edna : If it hadn't been for him I would have stayed, but how could I tell a woman what kind of man she was married to?

Sally: Before we get to California, I would like to put this in -- as much for your family as anybody -- being an old jazz person, I'd like to know what jazz people, musicians that you knew in Kansas City and liked.

Edna : Okay, as I said, the first one I knew was Benny Moten, whom we lived next door to.

Sally: As a child?

Edna : As a child. Then I knew, let's see, I'm not saying I knew -- except for Benny Moten I don't think I knew any of them intimately -- I was used to them - there was Count Basie, Andy Kirk, let me see now, Kimmy Lunceford, Duke Ellington, oh, I lost the picture that he sent me. I was in high school -- with a girl whose parents were friends of Duke Ellington's and when he came to town that's where he stayed. So one day I asked her to ask him to give me an autographed picture, and he sent me a picture with his real name on it. Let's see, what's his real name?

Sally: Edward?

Edna : Yes, Edward Kennedy Ellington -- I believe that is what it was. A very nice picture and somehow over the years I lost it.

Sally: Probably very valuable if you have it.

Edna : Yes.

Sally: Did you know Julie Lee?

Edna : I had heard her, didn't know her.

Sally: Pete Johnson?

Edna : Oh, yes, Pete Johnson.

Sally: Tampa Red?

Edna : Well my mother liked Tampa Red's records.

Sally: Coleman Hawkins?

Edna : Yes.

Sally: Did you know Coleman Hawkins?

Edna : I didn't know him, as I said, but I know his music and I've seen him. And there are others, many more, I can't remember exactly.

Sally: Did you ever hear Benny Moten practicing next door?

Edna : Oh, yes. We were there when he was practicing. And then he'd have jam sessions.

Sally: Oh, boy, right next door.

Edna : Yes, it was really a party all the time.

Sally: I'll bet it was --

Edna : When my mother came and got us all back together again, after a couple of years we moved to another apartment. My older brother, not the oldest, he was younger than I was, born an artist -- gifted, very gifted. He never had any special training, but as a little kid, when he first learned to hold a pencil he could draw. He was about 8 years old, I believe, and my brother under him was about 6. The two of them would go down to the Union Station with a big drawing pad and pencil every Saturday and Sunday or some night other than a school night, and people coming and going would pay him to sketch their picture. He made pretty good money for a little 8 year old kid.

Sally: Eight years old!!

Edna : Yes, and he helped Mama support the family by drawing those pictures at the Union Station. When he was older and had graduated from high school, he got a scholarship to the Kansas City Art Institute, and one of the teachers was Thomas Hart Benton.

Sally: Wow! He died of a stroke?

Edna : He died of a stroke on the subway in New York two nights before

I was to meet him at Kennedy for dinner. That was in '81. I was to change planes at Kennedy and he was going to meet me there, but two nights before I left, my brother in Kansas City called me and said that they couldn't reach David, they didn't know where he was. Which was odd. We kept trying to locate him but nobody knew where he was.

Sally: Your brother's name was David Hunt -

Edna : David Hunt --

Sally: Now, you came to California?

Edna : Yes, I came to California in November, 1943.

Sally: What did you do here?

Edna : Well, I took the first job I could get - just so I could kind of get my bearings - and that was at the Hunter's Point cafeteria, as a bus girl. Now the first time in my life I ever heard the word "tote" was there. I was lifting some trays off the table one day, incidentally I think I worked there about three days, when this black kid came up behind me - he was a busboy - and asked, "Can I tote these for you?" he repeated and held out his hands. I assumed he meant 'carry' so I gave them to him.

Sally: That brings us into a discussion, I think, of black language. Are there different - I've really been puzzled about this - are there different dialects that represent Africa; is it an Americanized version of something, or is it English which has been made specially?

Edna : It has more to do with the part of the country you're from. If you talk to people from New York, black and white all sound alike. People from the midwest all sound alike. Black or white. People from the west all sound alike. They use the same words. They understand each other. Now, it could not be African because the slaves, as a group of people, did not all speak the same language. It was common custom among the slave holders, slave owners, to separate members of the same tribe, because they did not want them conversing in their own languages. This is the way the languages were destroyed. As I said, there wasn't only one language, there were lots of different languages. The people, the slaves, because none of them spoke English at all, learned to speak English the way their masters spoke the language. If they worked for Germans, they learned to speak English in a German way; if they worked for the French, they learned to speak English the French way. Whatever language the masters spoke that's the way they learned it. And that accounts for the difference in the way black people speak.

Sally: Then there isn't such a thing as Black English?

Edna : No! There's no such thing as Black English. I'm not sure, but there seems to be more blacks from the south than from any other part of the country because, of course, that's where the slaves were. So, they speak a Southern dialect. White America wants to attribute that to every black person they see, it makes it easier for them. Some have suggested that so-called Black English be taught in schools. Do you see what I mean? This is another way of keeping black people out of the labor market. But there is no such thing as Black English, no matter what they say. When they talk about putting Black English in the schools, who are they going to get to teach it? No teachers I know speak so-called Black English. They may have a Southern accent - I mean a Southern dialect, an Eastern dialect, or a Mid-Western dialect, but it's nothing like what they call Black English. There is no such thing.

Sally: Now you worked three days in the cafeteria.

Edna : Yes. I probably would have worked longer, I didn't like it because it was the type of people that you came in contact with, not the workers, but the clientele, were the lowest of the low.

Sally: That was the shipbuilding clientele?

Edna : That was the shipbuilding industry, yes.

Sally: We should make that clear.

Edna : Yes, and they were the most ignorant people I had ever come across in my life. They didn't know how to say a proper thank-you or they didn't know the rules of common courtesy. Those are some of the ones who were, because they were white, fortunate enough to buy homes - the homes that they didn't want black people to live in. I mean in the neighborhoods that didn't want black people. It is just as simple as that. Anyway, when I walked in there the third morning, I was about ten minutes late because of traffic, and the supervisor says to me, "Well, if you can't get here on time---" and I said, "I'm only a few minutes late." "Nevertheless," she said, "if you can't get her on time, we'll just have to let you go." I said, "You can let me go right now." I've always had the attitude, even today, and I guess that's why I'll never be rich, that since I wasn't trained for anything in particular, and I can learn anything that anyone else could, I didn't have to stay on a job I didn't like - and I didn't have to take anything I didn't like. I could always get another job, and fortunately that's the way it's always been. Because I'd been told that if you quit this job you can't get another job. But anyway, that's why I quit that job. Then I went to work in

a warehouse and I joined the warehouse union. I worked first at a place called Fruit Industries, where you'd sit on a stool and slapped labels on bottles for 8 hours a day.

Sally: Good grief!

Edna : Well there was no way I could do that, so at noon the third day, I walked out. I quit. I couldn't stand that job, I quit. So they sent me to Schenleys. The liquor people. I went there and I was doing pretty much the same thing so I walked out. I went back down to the union hall and they sent me to Woolworth's warehouse in San Francisco. There were a lot of Italian women working then and most of them didn't speak English very well, if at all. But the floor lady was a white American. So one day I was working on the second floor, way in the back alone. There was a restroom on that floor and there was one on the first floor, and there was one in the basement. Well, since I was working on the second floor I had no reason to go to the first floor if I wanted to go to the restroom. So I was back there among a bunch of stock, stacking, all by myself, when the floor lady came up to me and asked me if I had been to the ladies room. I said, "Where?" She said, "On the first floor." I said, "No. I have no reason to go down there." So she said "Okay" and left. I thought no more about it. But just before it was time to quit, we were all down on the first floor and there seemed to be an argument going on. A girl that I lived with at the time and the other black girls - there were about a half dozen of them, were on one side and all the Italian women were on the other side, and the floor lady was standing in the middle talking. Well, it seems that one of the Italian women had gone to the restroom, had loose bowels and had just done it all over the seat, and left it there. And as dumb as I am, I'm not thinking that people are like this in the first place, never having met people like this before, and Elanor, my friend, was saying, "I know she couldn't have done it. I live with her, and she's one of the cleanest people I have ever seen."

Sally: Were you the only black lady there?

Edna : I was darker than anybody else. I was darker. And she was defending me. Vigorously. And I didn't know what was going on. I asked, "What's the problem?" And she said, "They said you went to the bathroom and messed it up." I was speechless. I didn't know what to say. But when you run up against something like that - here they are going to accuse me because of course they didn't believe me, just a little black girl, here, you know, of course she would do that!

Sally: Passing the buck.

Edna : Yes, and even if I had, I wasn't raised like that! There was no way possible I could do something like that. But they had all decided that I was going to be the one blamed for it. So, I quit. I went over to the union hall, and they wanted to know what happened, so I told them I didn't like the way I was treated. They said we're going to send you on one other job. Now if you don't stay on that job, we're not going to back you again. So they sent me to Coffin-Reddington, which was a drug warehouse. It was nice. I liked it there. I was packing parcel post for the military. There were two sailors working there - you see sailors could work in these places if they had time. One was an older guy from the Ozarks, Missouri, and the other was a young guy - I forget where he was from. Anyway, the older guy was very nice. He had this Ozark twang, you know, but he was real nice - I mean there was nothing racist about him at all. He was just "people" and he treated everybody the same way.

Edna : The other guy got an idea in his head that black people had hard heads and that black people were a different kind of animal, you know, something like that. But that hadn't got through to me, yet. I'm not looking for that in anybody, I'm not raised that way. Anyway, he was teasing me one day, and I was teasing him back and while I'm working he comes up behind me and slams his fist down on the top of my head. He was still playing, but that hurt so bad the tears came and he was so shocked that I could hurt, that I could feel pain, that he just stood there. That's how ignorant some white people were. I had to learn all this, step by step. He was so concerned, that I was actually hurt and crying, that he came over and put his arm around me and said "I'm sorry." After that, he was nicer. At the same time there were a couple of Italian guys there - older men - and they thought, well, black girl....there were only three women and a black man, and I was the youngest so they thought, I guess, well, maybe they heard black women were easier to get and they could just hit on me and nothing said about it.

Sally: Did you have problems with that all your life?

Edna : Yes, all my life.

Sally: Being harassed by men---

Edna : By white men.

Sally: Always?

Edna : Always. Always by white men. A black man who wants to meet you, you know, he would come up and say, "Hello, Baby," or something like that, but he wouldn't put his hands on you or touch you or use any of these nasty little approaches -- it's always white men. They would approach you on the street.

Sally: What about white women's attitude -- towards black women?

Edna: Well, frankly I've always felt a little sorry for white women, as a whole. There are those who always felt that they were wanted for the, what would you call it, the status that they could give their men. It seems that to have a white woman gives them some prestige and the men wanted them in the front. At the same time, behind their back they were after some other woman. And since they've always said that black women are the most passionate in bed, those were the ones they were after. Nothing is farther from the truth, I can tell you that. I mean this is a myth that has been built up, that white women are cold and black women aren't. That's the biggest lie going. Anyway, I felt that white women generally speaking were a little jealous of black women, because they saw a side of their men that they couldn't see. That they weren't allowed to see. But still, they considered themselves lucky because they had the most material things. I mean they had the money, the jewels and homes and everything like that, which the black women didn't have. But there is another side to their men as important to them too, and they didn't have that.

Sally: Do you think California is more racist than Missouri?

Edna : What do you mean?

Sally: I mean do you think that black people have a harder time existing in Missouri than they have in California? Do you think white people give them a harder time?

Edna : In California than they do in Missouri?

Sally: Or in Missouri than in California?

Edna : It's been a while. I can't compare now, but at the time there really wasn't much difference, except that in California at that time, there was competition for the jobs.

Sally: Ah.

Edna : You see that makes a difference in race relations.

Sally: Bet it does.

Edna : Yes, it's economics. So at the time I came here they didn't have that competition in Kansas City, but they had it out here and there were places in San Francisco where we couldn't go. The black people couldn't go to, like places in the Fillmore. I remember one night my friend and I and several other people including some sailors went into a restaurant to eat. Here

was this big restaurant, white linen on the tables, and nobody sitting there, except the owners and the manager, three people. We walked in and there were reserved signs on all the tables. So they said we couldn't come in. Okay, so we went on down the street and went into a black place, which was just as nice, and ate. But I thought that was pretty stupid, because the black people were getting the money and they were sitting up there with their racism, starving. That didn't make sense at all to me. One time when I was working at a Lerner Shop on Market Street in San Francisco --

Sally: You went there after you left the other place?

Edna : When I left Coffin-Reddington, it was to go back to Kansas City to meet Warren. I walked into the Union Station in Kansas City on V-E Day. That was in May -- and Warren didn't get home until October. So I was there a whole summer. When I came back, I took a job as an elevator operator and maid at the Lerner Shop.

Sally: In San Francisco?

Edna : Yes. They didn't have any black sales girls then, remember?

Sally: Well, I was trying to remember the store, and I don't know where the store was.

Edna : On Market Street, it was right next to the Emporium. I was a part-time elevator girl. They had a regular elevator girl, but she only worked part time, so I filled in ---

Sally: You shared the job ---

Edna : I shared the elevator job, but I was the maid. So when she left I did the whole thing, and I quit that one too. The manager who hired me was a nice guy. He asked me if I'd worked for any other Lerner Shop before, and I said yes. He wanted to know where so I put down the one in Kansas City, not knowing he would check their New York offices to verify this. They had a list of all the employees throughout the country!! I didn't know that!!! Anyway, I had worked there for about four months, and one day the manager called me into his office. He said, "Edna, I've been checking the records back in New York and they have no record of you ever working for Lerner Shops." I said, "Well," -- no point in lying -- I just had to brazen it out. I said, "Well, I never really did. But when I came here I needed a job and felt that if you knew I hadn't worked for a shop before you wouldn't hire me." He smiled and said, "Well, ordinarily I'd fire you but you've done a good job, and we like you. But take a tip from me, don't ever lie about a job again."

Sally: And you never did!

Edna : One more time - but that's another story. I said, "I won't." So there was nothing more said about it. Later on he was transferred to another city and a new manager came in from New York. He was one of those real, go-get-em, get-em-done kind of guys, you know. I had put in for a Memorial Day off, because I wanted to go with my husband and Eleanor and her husband down to Bakersfield, which was their home, to spend the holiday. So we went down on Friday.

Sally: Warren had by that time come to California?

Edna : Oh, yes, he had come to California in November of '45.

Sally: What did he find work doing?

Edna : He went to work for Hills Brothers.

Sally: And he stayed with them, didn't he?

Edna : Until he retired, two years ago.

Sally: So that's 40-odd years.

Edna : Yes, that he was with Hills Brothers. I came back to work on the Monday. Now, I had told this man I was going to be off that Saturday - and he'd said, "Okay." I had told him 3 weeks ahead of time. And he said, "All right." When I came in on Monday morning he met me at the door and wanted to know where I had been Saturday. I said, "I told you I was going to be out of town on Saturday and you said it was okay." He said, "You never told me a thing!" I said, "Yes, I did." He said, "Are you calling me a liar?" Well the hair was up on the back of my neck and I said, "Well, you look about as much like a liar as anybody else I ever saw." "Well! I could fire you." I said, "I quit." I never took my coat off. I walked out! So, anyway I got a job after that with H & R Block (not the tax people) - they made men's jackets. They were on Mission Street. I worked there until I was 7 months pregnant with Jody, my first child. I had one other job in the city after that, and that was working for some members of the Canadian Consulate. I would serve their dinners and parties. The last time I worked the Consul's wife told me that I didn't have to come anymore. They were entertaining the personnel from a Canadian ship. She wanted to know if I had a black uniform, black shoes and a white apron - which I did. They had invited a few Canadian and English women, who lived in the city, to entertain them. So they were all sitting there as I walked in with a tray of drinks and passed them around. When I came back to the kitchen, it was just like a Conga line, I had all these sailors behind me, --

Sally: No kidding!

Edna : Every one! And I hadn't said a word to them, you know. They were all right behind me and came into the kitchen.

Sally: White men?

Edna : Yes, they were all white.

Sally: All following you?

Edna: Yes, it was the funniest thing you ever saw. I put my tray down and looked around, and they were all hanging around the door and everything. I needed more glasses off the shelf, so I asked - one of them who was standing right underneath the cupboard to move. I said, "I'd like to get those glasses." They said, "Oh, let us help you." So they were up there pulling glasses down when finally a couple of women came in and said, "We didn't know the party was in here." The men said, "Oh, no, no, we'll be right out there," but they hung around the kitchen a while longer. They were all very nice, you know, just seemed to think that there was more fun in the kitchen! But anyway, they finally went out --

Sally: You weren't pregnant then?

Edna : No, no, I wasn't pregnant. But that was the funniest thing, so she told me I didn't have to come back that evening.

Sally: Now you still lived in San Francisco? When did you move to Menlo Park?

Edna : In '55 we moved to Menlo Park. Warren and I were living in an apartment building on Golden Gate and Scott in San Francisco when Jody was born in 1949. So we were shortly informed by the landlady that they didn't allow children in the building.

Sally: So it's always been that way.

Edna : Yes. So we looked all around and couldn't find any place to stay, so finally we applied for public housing. We finally got a place out in what they call "Crocker Amazon" - it's just below the Cow Palace.

Sally: I remember.

Edna : Stacey was six weeks old when we moved down here. So Lance and Alison and Stacey too, because he was too young to know the difference, have lived here all of their lives.

Sally: Was Menlo Park, the part where you lived, incorporated then?

Edna : Always has been.

Sally: Was it a black community when you moved in?

Edna : No, no, no, no, it was white. And that's another story - it was all white.

Sally: You were the first black people in it?

Edna : Not in it, not in the entire community; on our street. That was when real estate was beginning to get profitable.

Sally: You bet.

Edna : And the real estate agents from the city had discovered this part of the Peninsula, and they were coming down here telling the white people that their neighborhoods were going to be overrun with what they called "niggers" and they'd better get out while they could. They wanted to buy up the houses and they knew the black people in San Francisco and especially in the projects, were looking for homes for our children. Our children needed places to play and nice neighborhoods to live in, so they were going to make a profit both ways.

Sally: The realtors said that?

Edna : The realtors - oh, yes. Well, you know, after all they're talking to white people who use these words all the time, that's the way they referred to us.

Sally: Any local realtors do this? You spoke of the San Francisco realtors saying this. Did most of the realtors say the same thing?

Edna : Well, I don't know for sure. But I know the realtors mostly were from San Francisco.

Sally: So you were not the first black family to move in?

Edna : No, I think when we moved into Belle Haven there were about a half dozen other families who had just moved in about three months earlier. The realtors had told the white people that they were going to be overrun with black people and they panicked. They sold their houses for less than they were worth, so they got away from this black tide, and the realtors sold them to us for more than they were worth, so you see, they made out on both sides.

Sally: You bet they did.

Edna : Sure that's what it was. If somebody told me that I'd better get out of my house because I'm going to be overrun, with a certain kind of people, certain race, well now the first thing I'm going to think is, they can't take my house and they can't take my neighborhood if I don't move.

Sally: But they didn't think that.

Edna : No, they didn't think that. It scared them to death, you know.

Sally: Did you have problems?

Edna : Yes, I did. When we moved in Jody and Bobbie were in school. Bobbie was in kindergarten, Jody was in first grade. And I took them down to Belle Haven school, you know - which was a nice school. Well, some of the teachers were nice. In fact, there were one or two who were outstanding. On the whole, the teachers didn't want to be bothered with the black kids, but they didn't abuse them or anything like that, they just ignored them. Jody had no sisters, no one to play with, and the little girl across the street was in her class. So she asked me one day if she could ask her mother if she could come out and play. I said, "Sure." So I stood there in the doorway while she went across and Jody asked if her little girl could come out and play, and the woman said "NO!!" and slammed the door in her face. Six-year-old kid, can you imagine?

Sally: A lot of hurt.

Edna : Anyway, I said, "Jody, come on, you can play with your brother." She said, "Okay," and she never said any more about it. Then, one day, there was a little program at school, and I had taken the babies, which I had three of, at the time, preschoolers, down with me to see the play and we all came back home together, and I was carrying Stacey and Bobbie was ahead of us, you know how boys are - walking ahead. When we got to the front of the yard the little boy next door who was all of four years old stood there in the yard and said, "Nigger, nigger, nigger, nigger." So Bobbie said, "Mommy, he called me a bad name." I said, "I heard him. But don't you worry about it, Honey, they're worried about you. They're not worried about what he's going to do, or what he's going to be. They don't care." I said, "Don't you care what he calls you. He's nothing." And we walked into the house. Well, his front door was open and his parents heard what I said, but they probably told him not to say that again, or something like that, but they heard him. I'd been called "nigger" by a little kid who wasn't big enough to hardly toddle - I was just walking past his house: "Nigger, nigger," - this was in Kansas City. Well, now, you know --

Sally: That's an assault on your soul.

Edna : Of course. It is, it really is. You know people don't understand, to teach these little kids to hate somebody and scorn people because they are a different color.

Sally: That's hard to take, day after day.

Edna : It is, it really is.

Sally: And hard to keep your balance of disposition all the time. And then we have people like Shockley --

Edna: Yes, this man is really laughable. He won a Nobel Prize for physics, not genetics.

Sally: I'm not sure.

Edna : Anyway his field lies in physics --

Sally: Should have stayed with it.

Edna : He should have stuck with that. But this is a man who had to prove himself, convince himself, that he was better than other people, so he comes out with this - that blacks are genetically inferior to him?

Sally: Well, let's talk about your school, at work, because you started out working at M-A or Ravenswood?

Edna : Well, I need to explain that Ravenswood High School was not in the Ravenswood School District.

Sally: I'd forgotten it; I knew it at one time.

Edna : Ravenswood High School belongs to the Sequoia District. Always has. I had to explain this just recently to a friend because she was complaining about their taking Ravenswood away from the district - and I had to explain that Ravenswood High School had never belonged to the Ravenswood Elementary School District -- if it had been, it would have been a Unified School District. So when they first started desegregation in earnest and they wanted to create this new school, to attract the white kids to the southern part of the district, that's when I went to Ravenswood, and that was in '71.

Sally: You mean M-A?

Edna : No, Ravenswood, in '71. And when they closed Ravenswood, in '76, I was transferred to M-A.

Sally: I see. And you've been there for---

Edna : I was there for nine years - I was in the district 14 years.

Sally: Really? What did you do?

Edna : I was an instructional aide.

Sally: Which meant that you had to deal with all kinds of kids, right?

Edna : Yes, and I dealt mostly with remedial students, because that's what the funding was coming for. The Sequoia District, I don't think, has ever paid for full time aides. That never came out of their budget. This was a separate, federally funded budget. It was ESAA and ESEA for remedial kids who were mostly black - although there were some Hispanics -

Sally: Why is it that there are more blacks in the remedial reading - is it because they don't feel that there is a sense of opportunity for them out there, so why try? I spent nine years at M-A trying to teach kids to read, and my objection then, was that the material that they offered these kids to read was poor - I wouldn't be interested if I were they - but I am trying to get at the basic line - why?

Edna : Okay. Federally funded programs were very lucrative to some people. Now we get back to economics and exploitation - this is the whole thing. As long as the Ravenswood Elementary School District could keep the kids undereducated, they would have an excuse and a reason for getting extra funds from the government for the school district which usually went into somebody's pocket.

Sally: So what you're saying is that they deliberately exploited --

Edna : Exploited their own kids --

Sally: So they could pocket money....

Edna : Of course. I mean --

Sally: But they are wrecking the resources of their future.

Edna : Of course, of course. But you see a lot of people are so short-sighted that they don't see this and even if they do see it, it's a way to assure themselves that there will always be the few making a lot of money off the many. See? Now, these people, the administrators and the teachers in the Ravenswood School District, which are all black, don't have kids in the Ravenswood School District. Their kids go to the private schools - they can afford to make money off these kids, and in turn, when their

kids graduate with a good education, that's just some competition that they don't have. See what I mean?

Sally: You'd think they would be more mindful of their responsibility.

Edna : You would think so, but no, they figure that if there are only a few of them, then they would make a lot of money. They figure they have enough competition from the whites that - they're not really looking at the color, they're looking at the social level - that's what they're looking at. Do you know what I mean? And there's nothing they can do about the competition from the whites, but they can decrease the competition by keeping the ones they're exposed to, dumb. See what I mean? And this is what's happened. They'd be the last to admit it, but it's true.

Sally: Do you think M-A has improved at all from the time you first went there in relationship with the black community?

Edna : Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

Sally: And who is responsible for that? A lot of people, or do you think of one person that you think did a lot?

Edna : No one person. Now, I give Doug Murray a lot of credit, because he kept his cool. I could see him boiling inside sometimes - and he's even gotten mad at me - but he's kept his cool through a lot of that, you know - and he rode it out. I have to give him credit. He's a good principal, a good man. And he tried his best to understand when he was having problems understanding, you know? But the principal before him, Dick McLean, couldn't deal with it at all.

Sally: Are you saying there are black racists as well as white racists - people who would want to keep themselves separate from the whites...

Edna : Right. And anytime a white person gets angry with a black person, that person is automatically racist. See what I mean? So there is no way that she and I could get along, because I really believe in being fair to everybody --

Sally: Somebody at the high school who was black, who was a very black racist.

Edna : Very racist - and wanted me to be the same way. Well, there is no way I could be that way. Didn't want me to speak to people she wasn't speaking to, have anything to do with people she wasn't having anything to do with, and I'm just not like that. I mean if I see somebody and I like them, well, fine, and if you don't like them, that's your problem, not mine.

Sally: It's a problem of personality and not of skin color?

Edna : Right. And I always feel that if you get mad at me and bawl me out and telling me, well color has nothing to do with it! Why can't you get mad at me? I get mad at you! It doesn't make a bit of sense. But she felt that way--

Sally: So you do feel that the high school and the education system has improved for the black kids?

Edna: Yes, it has improved for the black kids and it's there for them. If they want it. But if you resist what's being offered to you, you can't blame people for not wanting to waste their time when there is somebody else willing to take it. And that's the way it is with education. Because I've worked there and I've told these kids -- they say the teacher's not paying any attention to them. I say you're not cooperating with the teacher, you know. What about your grades - are you doing your own work? You're not, you know, goofing off and stuff like that. And I say, well, why do you think the teacher is going to waste time on you when the teacher could use her time to help somebody else who wants to be helped? And I've been asked by kids, even when I was given a special class to take care of at school, and I'd grade their papers, and they'd ask me why, especially freshmen, why do you give me an F and him C's when in junior high school I got all A's and B's? I told them, you've been ripped off in junior high school, that's why. I said if you get an A or B from me, you're going to earn it. And I've been called racist too, by black kids.

Sally: Okay, what other problems did you have?

Edna : The habit of calling each other "nigger." I pretty well had that broken up.

Sally: I don't even know where the word comes from.

Edna : I don't either. From '71 till, oh I guess about '81, '82, that was one of my biggest jobs - was to keep these kids --no, it was even more recent than that. I have to say until I left school, practically. There were always some that I had to tell. The last kid I had to tell was a freshman. Every time he referred to a black person it was "Nigger, nigger, nigger" - no matter who he was around. I said, "I don't like that word," in fact, I won't allow it in the classroom and "If you're going to use it, get out. Because that word is insulting." One group of kids I taught a lesson once. They always called each other "nigger, nigger," you know, and I had told them about it. So one day there was a little white kid among them - these were juniors - and he had a dispute with a black girl sitting at her

desk when she said, "Mrs. Murphy, come here a minute." I went over there, and she said, "He called me a nigger." I said, "So, what? What do you expect me to do about it?" I said, "Isn't that what you call each other." She sat there with her mouth hanging open. And after that I didn't hear that word in the classroom any more. Because if she thought that I was going to jump on this kid -- I mean, I can understand how she felt, but after all, how can you condemn somebody for something you do all the time? So I wasn't about to say anything about it. She had no recourse.

Sally: Do you think black kids these days feel they have more of a chance than they had 10 years ago, or do you think we've gone back?

Edna : There has been a slip backwards. These kids, so many of them, are the children of dropouts, welfare kids, you know, who felt that the best way -- well, they haven't been taught to look forward, to the future, the parents came from a background of little or no education, and they always taught them, I have even heard them say from time to time, "Well, you're not going to be nothing, no how," and you don't tell a kid this. Because the kid is going to eventually believe it.

Sally: It's very, very, very important.

Edna : Right.

Sally: Their attitude about themselves...and I think that's the breakdown in the system.

Edna : That's right - black people, you know, just because you didn't have the chance at an education, don't think that your kids won't. Don't tell your kid, "Well, just because I couldn't do it, you can't do it either."

Sally: Look how well your kids have done.

Edna : Well, that's because I've always told my kids, "You're going to be President of the United States one of these days." I've always told them, you can do as much as you want and go as far as you want - you can go anywhere in this world - it belongs to you. Do anything you want to do. And fortunately, they have tried --

Sally: What do you attribute that to? Your education? Your mother? Your father? It isn't all you, you got it somewhere along the line as a small child.

Edna : Well, I'll tell you, Sally, I made my mind up, once I figured how this race thing was going and where I fit into it, that I

could do anything I wanted to do, simply because I was black - I was different. I don't belong to anybody in particular, I am an American. That makes me different. I am an American because I'm not all African; I cannot go back to Africa; there is no way to go back to Africa, and be accepted. I cannot go to France and claim France as my native land, although I have French in me. I couldn't even speak the language. I cannot go to the Indians because clearly I'm not all Indian. But I was born right here in America. This is my country. So I'm an American and as an American and as a black person I can do anything I want to do. It's just as simple as that. And that's the way I've told my kids, you're a black American, you can do anything.

Sally: Does your husband feel the same way?

Edna : Yes. He feels that way, only he's not as aggressive as I am.....

Sally: But I'm still trying to get at how you developed this feeling.

Edna : Well, you develop it from experience. Living around different people. You see, when you've lived around different people as much as I have - and I lived around black people, Irish, Syrians, Jewish people, Indian people, Greeks, Italians - you know we had a whole slew of them in Kansas City - Mexicans, - I taught one Chinese girl to speak English.

Sally: Did you, really?

Edna : Yes - and one of my best friends is Vietnamese. If you're exposed to so many people you learn that except for skin color, hair texture, language and other customs, religion, etc., people are basically the same.

Sally: You've moved down to Menlo Park and then we talked about your work at Menlo Atherton - and ---

Edna : Well, you know, I was at Ravenswood first -

Sally: Was that harder?

Edna : No, I worked in the science department, as an aide in the resource center, which means that I kept track of all the materials and books and things they used, and once in a while they would send one of the kids in for special tutoring if the teacher was busy with something else. There were four teachers, one of whom was African - her name was Elizabeth Wangari, and she was Nigerian, and for a long time she wouldn't have anything to do with me at all. She would ask me different questions about the materials and I would show her and I tried to be as helpful as I could. One day she said to me, "Edna, you know, you're different."

I said, "What do you mean, different?" She says, "You're not like I expected black people in America to be." I said, "How did you expect us to be?" She said, "I was told by all white people (and this was when I found out that white people that go to Africa tell lies about black people in the United States, because they don't want them to get close to them, you know) "I was told by the white people (and that's all she knew were white people, because of the ones that sponsored her over here) "and I was told by them not go get friendly with any black people in America because they weren't any good." I said, "Well, you see you've been lied to." She said, "Yes, I have." She had two nephews who were going to Palo Alto High School and living with a white family. She said she wanted them to get to know black people after she had met me and some of the other black staff, and she wanted to know if I knew a black family they could live with.

Edna : Well, I didn't, because all of the black families I knew had their houses full with their own kids, they didn't have any more room...I told her I didn't. She said, "Well, they can stay here and finish their high school education where they are. I imagine that's what they did, but I got a letter from her about a year after she went back to Nigeria asking me if I could find a family - a black family - that would take her niece, so she could go to school here. Well, I don't want to ever be responsible for anything like that, because I might find somebody who is very nice, who might know someone who is very nice, but I don't know their friends, or what their circumstances were, so I don't think I could ever be in a position to sponsor somebody like that. I really didn't want to, so I didn't bother about it. In fact I don't think - and I'm ashamed of myself - I don't think I ever even answered the letter.

Sally: One last question - Well, I think that's just about it, unless you think of something else -- One point you always agreed on with your husband --

Edna : Is to accept people on their own merits - not on color of your skin or nationality, or anything like that, religion, that has nothing to do with it. See, we have two white daughters-in-law and going to have another one in June.

Sally: I didn't know that.

Edna : Yes. And I have a grandchild who is half Mexican.

Sally: You have an interracial family right now!

Edna : And one of my sons was married to a black Japanese girl in Japan, at the same time Kenneth was married to this white

British girl, in England - they had no children, and they didn't work out - but that's another thing. But each one of them is married to a white girl now. Steve's wife, Dee, is a vocational nurse, and she's a lovely girl. They've been married about 7 years, and they don't have any children yet. Although they informed me they just adopted a dog! And Ken and Cathy don't have any children - she's still in the Military - she's white --

Sally: And who else is getting married?

Edna : Lance is getting married to a white girl, Linda, a lovely girl, down in San Jose, and they're planning a lavish wedding. They're living together, but she's so excited, they bought their rings last week, beautiful rings - and she's planning all this great big, beautiful ceremony. Warren and I are going to pay for the rehearsal dinner.

Sally: That's what you do.

Edna : Yes, I know, that's what the groom's family does. And she showed me the gown she's going to wear - and Lance is getting so sick of the whole mess, he's saying let's talk about something else, he's getting tired -- and she's so excited.

Sally: Well, I think that's a lovely way to end this tape, don't you?

Edna : I think so.

Sally: That you very much.

Sally: We have decided to add more to this tape - When you moved down here to Menlo Park, did you get involved in civic affairs right away?

Edna : No.

Sally: You were busy with the kids, I expect.

Edna : I was busy with the kids and I really didn't get involved in city affairs until about 1968 - '67 or '68.

Sally: What got you started?

Edna : Let's see, what did get me started? I think I got started with the school, actually. That's when they began desegregation, and I became acquainted with a lot of people - I was asked to sit on the housing commission, so I decided, sure, and that lasted 8 years.

Sally: Was this housing commission a county affair?

Edna : It was county and city. It was city, actually. The City of Menlo Park, although they did receive funds from the county. They received county funds and state funds to carry out their different projects, which was mainly low-cost loans and grants to people who wanted to upgrade their housing, all over the city, but mostly in Belle Haven where there were more people who needed it and couldn't afford it. Although there were a few over in West Menlo Park. Then they came in with what they called Section 8 - and this was a plan whereby mostly welfare people needed help paying their rent. This was a government program - and most of the people who qualified were single mothers with children. And a few with two parents, but not many, mostly mothers with children and this means that the government would pick up 80% of their rent. Now, the rub came in when they wanted to put all of them, all of the Section 8 housing over in Belle Haven and I considered this insulting, because up to that time most of the people owned their homes in Belle Haven, but as the years went by and people got better fixed financially, they moved out of their homes and some rented them, and when you start renting that's when your property values go down. Because renters as a rule - once in a while you may meet one who is different, but as a rule renters don't take care of property. That's where we ran into trouble. And this is where Section 8 plan came in. They wanted to put them all in Belle Haven, as I said. I resented that and I told them so. One little woman on the committee, who lived in the Willows, which is west of Bayshore - inferred that I was being cold and heartless and not caring about people. I told her, no, I am not. I am being realistic. If you are so concerned about them, why don't you have some next door to you? So you see, that pretty much ended that discussion.

Sally: I'll bet it did.

Edna : See, it's all right to put them next door to me, you know, but not ME. So, anyway I kind of stuck with that and I was odd man out on the committee for quite a while. After a few years, I decided why fight it, if they want to put it there, it's all right with me. They'd have done it anyway, but they wanted to put in more.

Sally: You're not on the housing committee now?

Edna : No, I resigned about 3 years ago. Then I was on the bus committee, to get a city bus into Menlo Park. Sam Trans grew out of what we called the "Menlo Park Carriage Authority." When I moved down here in 1955 there wasn't public transportation to speak of, in Menlo Park. There was one little bus. The end of the line was about 7 blocks from my house and it turned around and went back. Which meant that if I wanted to ride the bus,

I'd have to walk 7 blocks to catch it and 7 blocks back. It turned around at Ivy Drive and Hollyburne and went back up Willow Road. Now how far into Menlo Park it went, I don't know. But it ran every hour, on the hour, very poor service, But at that time they didn't really need a lot of buses, because there weren't that many people riding. As more black people moved in without their own transportation, they needed bus service to go to the supermarkets and work. The closest supermarket was All American, which was on Willow Road about two blocks off Bayshore and that's a long walk. Incidentally, when I moved down here, we didn't have to go down to Willow Road to get into Belle Haven. There was a cut-off at Hamilton and Bayshore, you could make a left hand turn - we called it "Blood Alley."

Sally: "Blood Alley" because of accidents?

Edna : Yes! You had to be very careful because there were no stop signs or stop lights, so you waited until traffic was clear coming from the opposite direction, and you made a mad dash for it.

Sally: How did you approach these people in Menlo Park - and say, we want more bus extension service?

Edna : Well, no, I didn't approach them personally. There were other concerned people in Menlo Park. Our committee was made up of people from all parts of the city. Belle Haven, the Flood Park area, Downtown, the Willows, and West Menlo Park. We had an old guy down there who was a retired admiral. You talk about your conservatives! It was him!!

Sally: I would like to talk a minute, if you will, about what you think the future of desegregation is going to be in this country. You said earlier you thought it had gone back a bit, rather than forward. Do you think there's any hope for advancement?

Edna : I think there's hope.

Sally: Do you think there's an increasing number of middle class black Americans and they're going to be the ones to help in this or are they going to turn their backs?

Edna : I don't think the upper middle class black Americans are going to do it. I think it's going to come from the economics of housing. At one time Belle Haven was all white, then it turned all black, then it turned black and Samoan, and now a lot of Mexicans have moved in. Now whites are moving in. What's happening is that young white families are looking for affordable housing and they're not as uptight about color as the older folks. They'll move in and they're going to treat you the same way you treat them. They're not afraid and you can't frighten them. You can threaten them, okay, they'll call your bluff.

See what I mean? They're not afraid of you because your color is different. You're just another human being. They're going to take care of the school situation, also because most of these people are fairly well educated and they know when their kids are being short changed so they're the ones who are going to take care of that. And it's going to start right over in Belle Haven where it started before. That's where it's going to come from. Soon the people who are renting there will have to go. The homes they are living in will be bought more and more by young white families. Eventually the neighborhood will be a model integrated neighborhood and they will have a model school because those people are going to demand it.

Sally: So what you're really saying is that basically the future lies in the younger generation....

Edna : Yes, because they don't have the old prejudices and fears of their parents.

Sally: Well, that may be true here in California, but in other places?

Edna : Actually, I haven't much thought about elsewhere. I've been in Chicago and Kansas City and those people - I don't know - if it comes it will be a long, long time coming. Because those people, blacks and whites, are so polarized, they are all, each one of them, thinking the same way about each other. When I was in Chicago I could not believe it! I know there are a lot of white people of different nationalities in Chicago, but the Poles are the people who puzzled me. They come from a land where they are so suppressed themselves, and they are the biggest bigots you ever saw. They make up a great segment of Chicago's population. My brother-in-law, whom we visited in Chicago, lives on South Michigan. All the blacks live on the south side. And all the whites live on the north side. Chicago is a big place, but you can walk all over that part of Chicago and never see a white face, and by the same token, you can walk all over a white section and never see a black face. My brother-in-law's girl friend took me to a white section of the city to visit a Marshall Fields store. There's one on State Street, one at the Water Tower, and I believe one in another area. She looked like she was a little on the defensive. Her whole manner changed. She was looking for the insult. Well, if we got one, I didn't see it, because I am looking at the clothes - not looking for insults. I didn't have time! But I felt the vibes coming from her. Each race stays in its own neighborhood. Well, now, you know that this isn't something that's going to be remedied soon or easily. When I was in Kansas City the people were so much more integrated than they were in Chicago. But Kansas City always was different from any other place in the midwest, or back East. Kansas City isn't the South.

Sally: It's a mixture.

Edna : True. It's a mixture. There were some stores you went to in Kansas City where you weren't allowed to try on the clothes. When I was there in '45 waiting for Warren, and as a kid growing up. We were never assigned any special section on the streetcars, or buses. We could sit wherever we wanted. I never heard anybody say anything about race riots or things at Swope Park where everybody went; there were night clubs we couldn't go to, like the Jockey Club on 12th Street. They had all black entertainment but they wouldn't let us come in.

Sally: Do you feel San Francisco or the Peninsula has a lot of segregation?

Edna : It's implied - some places - I haven't seen that though. Not really. Not recently. Anywhere we want to go, we just go, and we've always been treated decently. But back in the '40's, when I worked at the Lerner Shop a girl friend of mine was leaving to go and meet her husband who was in the Army. She worked at Bartels, a furriers up the street from the Emporium on Market Street. The day before she left I said, "Come on, let's go across the street and I'll buy you a drink. There was a bar and I don't think either one of us had ever been in there before, but it never occurred to us that we couldn't go in. It was lunch time and we didn't have much time, so we went across the street and sat at the bar. There were only one or two people in there. The little waitress looked up from behind the bar and saw us and went to wait on somebody else. She looked at us again and then went up to the bartender, and said something to him. He said, "Just ignore them." So my friend said, "Come on, let's go, we don't have time to go any place else, so let's forget it." So we left. I am sure there were many more places at that time that didn't serve black people. But it all comes down to economics, you know. Again. Economics. When they find out they're losing money and realize that my money is the same color as anybody else's money, then I'm welcome!

Well, what's going to happen? You know this old "divide and conquer" -- there will be the blacks and the Asians and the Mexicans competing for the few jobs that there are, and the Asians and the Mexicans will work cheaper than the blacks care to. As long as most people are doing well, financially, and working, you don't have any problems, but as soon as things get bad, that's where your problems begin.

Sally: Is there anything else you want to put down about what you've done in the community?

Edna : Well, I've done a lot of things as far as that's concerned -- I worked with the Bell Haven Community Group --

Sally: The Belle Haven Community Group? Now what did they do?

Edna : They were the Bell Haven Advisory Committee -- to the City. They kept the city abreast of things that the community needed. And in the school, let's see, I was the first black PTA president of Menlo-Atherton High School.

I was CSEA president of our local chapter 51 - that's the classified workers in the Sequoia district - what else did I do?

Sally: You did not continue your church affiliation?

Edna : No. Well, yes, I did. When I had children - my husband and I were baptized Catholics in San Francisco, so when we had kids, I always held that children should be exposed to some kind of religion early on. Then as they grew older, if they didn't like their religion, they could change, or drop out, but at least they knew about religion. They were all baptized, went to Catechism classes and had their First Holy Communion. By the time they were old enough for Confirmation they decided they didn't want the church. It bored them. I didn't argue with them about it. Maybe one of these days they'll go back and be confirmed. When I was growing up, I found that the nuns, some of them, had such dirty minds. Everything you did was suspect, and they expect you to live in a completely unrealistic world. Now, of course, as a kid you don't know this, you think the nuns are perfect and especially at that time, little girls were very impressionable. Every little girl wanted to be a nun when she grew up.

Sally: Really?

Edna : Yes. So, when I was approaching 11, I started sprouting. Well, in the first place, I got acne. I had the world's worst case of acne. And people were pretty ignorant then, too. The matron of the boys' home - the head matron, who was a black woman, had noticed it - The Mother Superior at Saint Monica's noticed it too, so they called me in one afternoon to talk to me. All nuns were white, incidentally. We had black nuns visit occasionally, and once or twice a black priest. Just so we would know that they did exist. Anyway, they wanted to know what I had been doing, and I didn't understand what they were talking about. I said, "What do you mean? What have I been doing? Nothing. Nothing." The matron said, "Oh, yes, you've been doing something - look at your face." "What's wrong with my face?" "You've been fooling around with boys!" I didn't even know how to fool around with a boy! Not only did I not

know how to fool around with a boy, I didn't know a thing about anything!

Sally: What minds!

Edna : Yes, so they said, "You're evil, you're evil." And after they finished scolding me, I went out just as puzzled as when I went in. I hadn't the faintest idea what they were talking about. So after that, they noticed I was sprouting. This breast, and big behind, so you know what the nuns did? They got me a full length girdle - full length from here to here - to wear all of the time. And do you know when I took it off? After I was married! That's how dumb I was.

Sally: Do you mean to say for 7 or 8 years you wore that full length.. the kind that laced in and hooked kind?

Edna : No, it wasn't the hooked kind - it was the kind you pull on.

Sally: An elastic type?

Edna : Yes, elastic. But it was a full length kind. Girdle and brassiere made all of one piece.

Sally: Good grief!

Edna : So, anyway, Warren said to me one night - I think we'd been married about 3 weeks or so...he said, "Don't you know you don't have to wear that thing?" I said, "Oh, I thought you liked me in it." He says, "No, take that thing off." I had a beautiful figure. A beautiful figure!! But I didn't know it because I had been wearing this thing - just like the Man in the Iron Mask!!

Sally: You're absolutely right! Did they do that to the other girls?

Edna : I didn't know any there that they did that to, no. I guess they didn't sprout as much as I did. There was something about me, though, that they always suspected, something about me, and I never could figure out what it was --

Sally: You're sensitive --

Edna : Right -- well, that might have had a lot to do with it, too.

Sally: I've been puzzled - where did you get that sense of freedom and independence? From your mother, your father?

Edna : My mother. My mother was always independent - I got it from her.

Sally: We're almost at the end of the tape. Quickly: How old did your parents live to be?

Edna : My mother died when she was 77, and she died in '71, and my father died in '75 or '76, but he was in his 70's, I think he was about 75 or so.

Sally: Have you any more important information to give before the tape runs out?

Edna : I can't think of anything that I haven't already said.

Sally: Thank you for sharing your experiences with us.

